

PERSONAL STATEMENT (839 words)

Field of Study: Women's Studies/Gender & Development

My interest in gender dates back to 1996 when I was involved in a Women's Union project providing credit for poor women. I had a chance to go to poor villages in central province of Vietnam and met many women. They were different from each other but had one thing in common, hard lives. One woman was abandoned by her husband and her in-laws as she could not give birth to a boy; one other was beaten ruthlessly by her drunken husband. The trip was such a learning experience for a city girl, born and raised in a relatively liberal family like me. For the first time in my life, I could understand the inequality between the cities and the countryside. I also started to wonder why these women had to suffer. My big decision after the trip was to work in development with the aim of fighting for social justice. However, the formulation of my goal to work for gender equality did not come about until year 2000.

In November 1996, several months after my journey to the countryside, I joined the _____ to work in a HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health Education program. We trained young women and men, to become peer educators on HIV/AIDS and life skills. The work brought me great inspiration; that year about 1,000 young men and women were trained to live a healthy life. However, I was also frustrated when people told us not to talk with girls about sex, as it was a men's topic or that the negotiation skills we helped young girls to develop were against Vietnamese tradition. These reactions from people I worked with again made me want to challenge gender-based expectations and help people understand that girls also have the right to know about sexuality and gain skills to help them live better lives.

In early 2000, I had a chance to attend a training course on Women's health at the Key Center for Women's Health in the Society, in Australia. The course was my introduction to academic work on gender. I had a chance to be exposed to many studies on current women's health issues, as well as learn from colleagues from other countries how they had overcome various challenges when promoting women's rights in health. Importantly, the course helped me to decide on the focus for my career, which is to work in the field I had developed an interest in—the field of gender equality promotion.

Coming back from the course, I proposed to take more responsibilities related to gender and committed to make our work more gender sensitive. My first achievement was a successful two-day workshop to raise gender awareness and integrate gender issues into HIV/AIDS work. I designed and conducted the workshop for _____ program staff in Hanoi. This type of workshop was then provided to all program staff, peer educators, and our counterparts in _____. From that time on, I was very active in making HIV/AIDS services offered by the _____ more relevant and accessible to both women and men. In October 2001, I was granted a scholarship to give an oral presentation to share my experience at the 6th International Conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, in Australia.

Later on, I felt that I needed to work more closely with gender issues. In December 2002, I joined the _____ to work as the National Program Coordinator for a gender-specific project and continue in that position. The project targets poor rural women and aims to contribute to the national efforts in poverty reduction and in improving the status of women through expanding employment opportunities. By now, the project has been successful in introducing direct interventions to assist poor women in some provinces and in building capacity for intermediate organizations, whose responsibilities are to empower women. The work at _____ has broadened my understanding of how gender-based restrictions lead to women's poverty and lack of rights. It also gives me a chance to work more with policy makers and has made me more interested in policy planning perspectives. I understand that raising gender awareness for project stakeholders and beneficiaries is important in promoting gender equality, but it is not adequate. Sensitizing the public to and advocating for more gender-sensitive policies are also key factors to ensuring the long-term effectiveness of any efforts to promote for gender equality.

My career goal is to become a better-trained person working for gender equality and women's rights. I can achieve this goal through working for an organization dealing with human's rights issues, like the ____; or a research institution that conducts studies that help support programming that improves Vietnamese women's access to equal rights. By doing so, I hope to have some degree of influence on policy makers so that they will formulate policies that are beneficial to women. I believe that completing a graduate program in the United States will help me later achieve my goal of working effectively for the rights of women.